

FOCUS ON THE LEARNER: FOSTERING GUMPTION FOR QUALITY, INDEPENDENT LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

How learners learn to take responsibility for their own learning remains a challenge for educators. One concept that has not been widely considered that we propose is an important requirement in successful independent learning is the concept of Gumption (Pirsig, 1974). Gumption is all about initiative and creativity, zeal and vigour - the practical application of applied intelligence. In this paper we extend Pirsig's conception of Gumption (the "psychic gasoline", 1974:273) to the enlightenment of those who connects with quality. We conceive of learners who are filled with gumption to be skilled at and highly aware of their sagacity, resourcefulness and foresight. Discussion will culminate in a model of teaching episode that fosters gumption. Implications of the approach for practice are also considered.

Gumption

"Learning is not so much an additive process, with new learning simply piling up on top of existing knowledge, as it is an active, dynamic process in which the connections are constantly changing and the structure reformatted".

Patricia Cross

In sum, learning that is dynamic is learning that is practiced by those with *gumption*.

The dictionary definition of *Gumption* is "nerve" (Roget's Interactive Thesaurus, 2004) and the word is introduced as a concept of "bravery". Synonyms include enterprise, get-up-and-go, horse sense, initiative, sagaciousness, savvy, resourcefulness, spirit and wit-the very characteristics needed of learners involved in successful student centred learning activities- learners who "get up and go". Deepak (2005) posits that 'doing' is the key to learning because research has shown that children retain 20% of what they hear; 40% of what they see and hear; and 75% of what they see and do. And while innovative teaching methods using smart boards-interactive white boards, computers combined with several media such as video, graphics and animation, as well as other forms of cooperative learning have contributed significantly towards improving

instructional strategies and teaching practice, the successful implementation and effectiveness of the learning process essentially depends very much on the amount of gumption that the teacher and individual learner has.

However, to foster "gumption", one needs to look at the concept as popularized by Pirsig (1974) who turned to his motorcycle in search of the grounds for an alternative conception of rationality. Pirsig shows that maintaining a motorcycle involves a wide variety of cognitive abilities. Activities in the maintenance would necessarily include attending to detail, making sound judgements and speculating wisely. Pirsig also argues that in order for these activities to be carried out successfully, one needs the proper emotional attitude, "the attitude of caring" which is necessary in order to be "attentive towards" and "engaged in" the tasks. Pirsig's argument is that a passionate caring is necessary for understanding, to reach the states in which inquiry and judgement occur. In a nutshell, our cognition, in his view, is dependent on our emotional states. For through impatience or boredom we lose our enthusiasm or gumption, ceasing to care about what we are doing. Gumption or enthusiasm allows us to

become engaged in our tasks. Once enthusiastically engaged, we may identify with what we are doing. Pirsig sees this identification as "care". He posits that by caring about what we do, we may be able to achieve "quality" in our tasks as we are wont to perform excellently!

Teaching that inspires

"The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires" - William Arthur Ward.

For any approach to be effective, i.e. for long-term learning to take place, an adequate supply of gumption is the first and most important tool to acquire simply because real-life problems present an ever-changing variety of goals, contexts, contents, obstacles and unknowns to deal with.

Further to this, in recent years, researchers have formed a strong consensus on the importance of engaged learning in schools and classrooms. This consensus, together with a recognition of the changing needs of the 21st century, has stimulated the development of specific indicators of engaged learning. Jones, Valdez, Nowakowski, and Rasmussen (1994) developed indicators of engaged learning that can act as a "compass" for reform instruction, helping educators chart an instructional course and maintain an orientation based on a certain vision of learning. However, in order to engage learners in learning, it is important that they are first motivated through

- Intrinsic motivation - Students will be most creative when they feel motivated by the task itself. When they are engaged because of their own natural interest and satisfaction in their work, they will be challenged to be creative through their own intrinsic motivation. External pressures or rewards are never as effective as internal motivation. In order to tap into that resource, they must be matched to tasks that tap into underlying values that motivate and excite them. Igniting the

intrinsic motivation is the key to unleashing creative potential but it requires good listening and observing. Intrinsic motivation and ownership is enhanced when people are free to approach their tasks the way they choose. They may not choose the mountain, but at least let them decide how they will climb it. Since creativity takes time, incubation periods have to be scheduled in. This is where teachers and students can take advantage of the new technologies as an enabling tool for fostering creativity.

- Group Features - Teachers must create groups or teams with a diversity of perspectives and backgrounds. When people come together with diverse intellectual foundations and approaches to tasks, ideas often combine in exciting and useful ways. When small teams use different learning activities and help team-mates learn to develop their understanding of a subject, it is called cooperative learning (Deepak, 2005). We often make the mistake of putting similar people together. This may seem desirable because these people see eye to eye and get along, thus making decisions quicker. Their very homogeneity, however, does little to enhance expertise and creative thinking.
- Encouragement and Support - We often neglect to praise creative successes and unsuccessful efforts and thereby inadvertently contribute to stifle creativity. To sustain passion, people need to feel their work matters and is important. This fits in well with the objective of cooperative learning strategy where group members strive for mutual benefit through each other's efforts and celebrate together any member's achievement and accomplishment. A certain tolerance is required for mistakes and failures, so that they can be used creatively. We often look for reasons not to use a new idea. Research shows that

an interesting psychological dynamic underlies this phenomenon. That cooperative efforts have been shown to result in raising student retention and boosting student motivation and satisfaction with their learning experience (Deepak, 2005). Teachers must put into place appropriate systems and procedures that emphasize that creative efforts are a top priority. We can support creativity by ensuring that information sharing and collaboration is the norm. That sense of mutual purpose and excitement that is so central to tapping into the power of intrinsic motivation must be encouraged and supported.

- Meaning is the key to engaging creativity - Whenever someone has a burst of creativity, it is because they've spent time thinking over some problem or situation that has meaning for them. They have become immersed and totally engaged. If we want students to be innovative, we must discover what is important to them, and we must engage them in meaningful issues. This also means that subjects are no longer taught as facts or figures, rules or regulations, but are integrated into a context and approached from a Problem-oriented perspective familiar to the students.

In a nutshell, teachers need to bear in mind the qualities that lead to gumption: intuition, will, joy, strength, compassion and that these qualities are drawn out of people by four tools; faith in their own creativity, absence of judgment, precise observation and penetrating questions. Teachers therefore need to acknowledge the fact that students are not passive recipients but active participants with some degree of control of learning.

Taking the mystery out of gumption

"There's only one way to succeed in anything, and that is to give it everything. I do, and I demand that my players" - do-Vince Lombardi

The key is to systematize the constant generation and testing of fresh ideas. In order to foster innovation and resourcefulness, teachers might do well to also consider these four steps:

1. Capturing good ideas
2. Keeping ideas alive and accessible
3. Imagining new uses for old ideas
4. Putting promising concepts to the test

If students are given opportunities, gumption can be bolstered provided they are encouraged to use good ideas from all sources inside or outside the classroom. Innovation and creativity are far less mysterious than previously thought. They are a matter of taking developed ideas and applying them in new situations. All it takes are the right resources and the right attitude.

The teacher needs to create a setting that enables students to move easily in and out of separate pools of knowledge, to keep learning new ideas and to use old ideas in novel situations. In this kind of environment there is talent, there is ingenuity, and there is knowledge. But in the end, fostering gumption requires hard, focused and purposeful work. If diligence, persistence and commitment are lacking, then no amount of talent, ingenuity or knowledge will be enough.

The issues described here represent only some of the difficulties encountered. While some of these students just lack the cognitive and social skills, others suffer from years of unchallenged learning. Many of them will fall into the category of passive recipients and as time goes by will never have a chance or opportunity to learn or unleash their hidden potential. Among the former are many very bright students who have the same sincere desires to belong to an educated community. For lots of reasons, including ineffective instruction, peer norms and feelings

of safety, these students have not learned how to work out problems effectively. They lack the "know-how" of not only critical thinking but also cooperative learning. The 'doing' which is the key to learning is just not there. Without doubt, there is a clear relationship between learning and behavior, such that learning affects behavior and behavior affects learning. This relationship should be a constant and continuing consideration for the teacher who will always be interested in the effective management of classroom behavior.

What seems obvious, then, is the importance of either individual or group behavior, for the success or failure of learning. This leads to the conclusion that managing behaviors in the learning context is synonymous with effective teaching and learning enhancement.

"The task of the excellent teacher is to stimulate 'apparently ordinary' people to unusual effort. The tough problem is not in identifying winners: it is in making winners out of ordinary people" Patricia Cross

Instructional strategies have to be planned as learners do not all learn in the same way and they do not learn the same things in the same way (Largey and Timmins, 2005) and that learning is affected by changes in behavior and attitude. Behavior change takes time. Attitude change takes more time. Some efforts at impacting change come in a flash of genius, but most result from a conscious and purposeful search for opportunities. Above all, it requires knowledge and focus. Without diligence, persistence and commitment, efforts at fostering resourcefulness in learning may not come to fruition.

In order to urge students to innovate, there must be a fertile atmosphere of creativity. Unleashing creativity requires more than brainstorming sessions. It is more than problem solving. People have ideas all the time. The real question is, "Which ideas are you going to use?" Teachers

have to guard against stifling ideas especially when it happens internally through their own voice of judgment. Negativity, judgment and fear are the enemies of creativity. To the extent these exist in the learning environment, there can be little creativity.

A Lesson that Fosters Gumption

A model lesson could be thus:

Topic:

- Using problem-Based Learning to produce Research Reports

Learning Objectives:

- Objectives include the evaluation of information, the production of an assignment, and a visual representation of the research.

Focuses on:

- comprehending a broad range of reading materials
- using contemporary technology to produce documents of quality for specific purposes and audiences
- delivering planned and impromptu oral presentations as individuals and members of a group
- presenting results of research

Time line:

- Students will spend approximately 3 hours per week, on this project. On two occasions each week students will be in the computer lab. The remainder of the assignments will be done in the classroom.
- Students will have five weeks to complete the entire project.

Materials and Resources Required:

- Internet Access
- define problems, lead conversations, set goals and engage in entrepreneurial activities.

- Reference books
- Archived documents
- Realia

Activities that foster gumption:

Achievement profile given that describes the level of achievement of the following activities:

- researching the topic using the internet, books, documentaries, magazines, and newspapers; creating note and source cards
- create a visual product and present it to the class
- write a letter to those in authority to recommend a course of action

Description of Lesson:

The approach involves engaged and problem-based learning as students work in groups to investigate and establish the problem on the chosen topic of Waste management. The entire project deals with a novel approach to teaching the class project paper. Students work in groups using various sources to arrive at their own theories of why we have problems with waste management. They will construct a visual concept map based on their research to establish the specific problem and arrive at theories about the increasing seriousness of waste management in this country. Individual students are to come up with one theory each- different from the others. They will write a group term paper discussing the validity of the various theories. Each group will use computer technology (Power Point, or a web page) to create a visual presentation that portrays one theory in more depth and present it to the class as a whole. Finally, they will write a letter to the authorities concerned telling them of what he should have known or might have done to alleviate the problem.

Gumption for Quality Learning

The aim of instruction is to make the environment and process of teaching better, to encourage students to study actively and to improve teaching quality and level. So the aim, content and process should meet prescribed needs. The selection, expression and organization of teaching contents should embody the predicted teaching aim with well-defined expression, accurate and suitable difficulty pitch. We all know everything is determined by teachers in the proceeding of traditional instruction. Teachers arrange teaching contents, teaching stratagems, teaching methods, teaching process, even the exercises done by students. Students just participate in the process passively, being instilled knowledge into their brains. However, in the environment that fosters gumption they pace to their own learning basis, interests. Teachers must focus on creating good conditions in selection of teaching contents, which can develop students' gumption, enthusiasm.

Teaching that fosters gumption deals with all kinds of instructional resources to meet the demands of teaching contents. Students are nurtured to have the ability of retrieval, selecting, identifying, using, expressing and exploiting information. Their learning is engaged.

What does engaged learning look like? Successful, engaged learners are responsible for their own learning. These students are self-regulated and able to define their own learning goals and evaluate their own achievement. They are also energized by their learning; their joy of learning leads to a lifelong passion for solving problems, understanding, and taking the next step in their thinking. These learners are strategic in that they know how to learn and are able to transfer knowledge to solve problems creatively. Engaged learning also involves being collaborative--that is, valuing and having the skills to work with others. Truly collaborative classrooms, schools, and

communities encourage students to ask hard questions, define problems, lead conversations, set goals and engage in entrepreneurial activities.

Implications for practice

The role of the teacher in the classroom has shifted from the primary role of information giver to that of facilitator, guide, and learner. As a facilitator, the teacher provides the rich environments and learning experiences needed for quality learning to take place. The teacher is also required to act as a guide--a role that incorporates mediation, modeling, and coaching. Often the teacher is a co-learner and co-investigator with the students.

Helping students see the connections between school and life can be accomplished by an interdisciplinary curriculum rooted in real-world topics that are exciting and timely. Learning can be further enhanced through a performance orientation that allows students to practice and be assessed on important work and life skills. This approach represents a blending of curricular and instructional practices that research has shown increase student engagement and learning.

Conclusion

"The lasting measure of good teaching is what the individual student learns and carries away"

Barbara Harrell Carson, 1996, *Thirty Years of Stories*

A student with gumption will say, "Going to class only last a few years but learning lasts a lifetime". If we believe that 'doing' is the key to learning, then we are only reconfirming the ancient Chinese proverb, "Tell me and I forget. Show

me and I remember. Involve me and I understand". Learning is a two-way communication between the teacher as facilitator and co-learner and the students as active participants and constructors of knowledge. Teaching and learning can be enhanced by several factors namely innovative instructional strategies, new technologies and good learning environment but it takes teachers and students filled with plenty of gumption to be able to take advantage of and to bring the real meaning of learning to the next level.

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